

## Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors

Panel discussion encourages education, discovery

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Muslim students explain Islam to an engaged audience of over 220 people during a special "Getting to Know Our Muslim Neighbors" event in April. (Photo by Darren Heslop)

By: Danni Francis

Recently, the Muslim community has been featured prominently in the news due to various world events and comments from presidential hopefuls such as Donald Trump. With anti-Muslim speech prominent in this year's political campaign and widespread misconceptions regarding what they believe becoming more and more common, it is increasingly important to clarify both what a Muslim is, and to re-humanize them in a society that tends to treat the term "Muslim" as synonymous with "terrorist."

Specifically, the term Muslim refers to someone who follows the religion of [Islam](#), a monotheistic and [Abrahamic religion](#) based on their holy book, the [Quran](#). Through increasing our understanding of modern-day Muslims and their faith, we can gain new insights on who they are as a people.

To help accomplish that goal, Andrews University held a special event this spring to help further understanding regarding the Muslim faith. In what attendees described as a successful event,

“Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors,” was attended by over 220 people. The event was committed to making strides in dismantling misconceptions regarding the Muslim faith. The event featured Muslim students (all of them studying on campus in the [physical therapy program](#)): Mohammad Talafha, Feras Alsultan, Malik Alanazi and Abdullah Juraishi, who served as panelists and discussed their Muslim faith and answered questions.

The student panelists come from two different countries: Alsultan, Alanazi and Juraishi are from Saudi Arabia while Talafha comes from Jordan.

Talafha, who is enrolled in the tDPT program on campus, contract teaches in the University’s [Department of Public Health, Nutrition & Wellness](#). In his home country of Jordan, he is a son of a retired army general, and he works as a pediatric physical therapist.

“I desire for people to love my country,” he says. “Good people not speaking up about the bad things that others are doing in the world is a major problem.”

Alsultan is no longer enrolled in school on campus because the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia does not recognize the Andrews DScPT program as a terminal doctorate, and so his scholarship from the government can no longer be applied to the Andrews program.

Alanazi, considered a charismatic leader by his fellow students, wanted to hear all of the questions solicited from the audience members, even the most unconventional.

“I was determined to create an environment where all questions were welcomed,” Alanazi explains. “My goal as a panel member was to promote authentic communication and common understanding.”

Juraishi was concerned in helping to accurately communicate all that the Muslim faith stands for. In the program he discussed “[zakat](#),” the third pillar of Islam. It is a form of alms-giving and religious tax.

“One benefit of giving zakat is obeying God – being a true Muslim,” Juraishi explains. “By freeing self from the love of possession and greed. Zakat also protects society; it can help the poor which might prevent them from stealing.”

[Caryn Pierce](#), assistant professor of physical therapy, post-professional assistant director and [behavioral sciences](#) coordinator at Andrews University, who both teaches and studies with the panelists, helped organize the “Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors Event” after being inspired by a series of events she experienced.

In December 2015, the Andrews University administration hosted a dinner for Muslim students following recent terrorist attacks to help ensure they still felt welcome on campus and to address any concerns they had. Pierce, who attended, felt compelled to help organize this additional event.

“I attended with our PT students and found that the general consensus was that they felt welcome and had not experienced any problems,” says Pierce. “But they didn’t like the way their faith was portrayed in the media and they wanted to have an opportunity to speak for themselves.”

At the start of “Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors,” Pierce introduced the speakers by saying, “I’ve had the opportunity and the pleasure over the last eight months to work as a professor and fellow student with our panelists. It has been a good experience; one I would like to now share with all of you.”

She continued, acknowledging that each of these students has their own voices and would like to share some important things. “What they see in the media has been somewhat disturbing and they wanted the opportunity to speak for themselves,” says Pierce.

Following her introduction, the panelists each took turns introducing themselves. The program included an overview of Islam, audience members participating by learning a few Arabic words, which was then followed by Pierce asking the panelists several questions.

The program also included some words by [Nicholas Miller](#), professor of church history and director of the [International Religious Liberty Institute](#). Miller spoke on religious liberty in America.

“I want to commend the courage of my brothers for coming and doing this,” said Miller. “There are complexities to all of our cultures and as the courage of these non-theologians has shown, they’ve given us a gift this evening. America is well-known for its stand on religious liberty. However, in a practical manner, it really only extends to people that we have respect for. A core element of religious liberty is human dignity, recognizing in the other a common humanity.”

The Muslim participants were pleased with the event and how it turned out.

“I am so grateful for the chance to explain our religion and to show who we really are and what we believe in,” says Juraishi. “I cannot explain very well what I felt after this event but I can say that I feel more involved and more welcome in the community.”

Talafha concurs. “I participated in this event because I felt that I had a responsibility to tell people about the real values of Islam,” he says. “If we stay quiet about what ISIS does, our silence could be interpreted as agreeing with what they are doing. Explaining the meaning of Islam can help break stereotypes in the United States.”

The program was well-received by community members, according to one account by Pierce.

“An Imam and his wife from a mosque in Benton Harbor were there,” she recalls. “The wife told me afterward that what we said about women was ‘perfect,’” reflects Pierce. “I am particularly proud that we got that right. She even invited me to come pray with her at the mosque sometime.”

Pierce plans to do a similar program again in the future and views this event as a starting point of dialogue.

“I feel it went about as well as it possibly could have,” says Pierce, commenting on the program. “It was an important first step.”

Announcements of upcoming events discussing this issue at Andrews University will be shared via the Andrews University website, [andrews.edu](http://andrews.edu), and the University’s social media channels (links below).

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